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ABSTRACT

Many states are adopting results-oriented school accountability systems. Some of the difficult issues that states are working through as they set up and implement strategies for academic intervention are discussed in this report. The report examines the "machinery" that needs to be in place to enable and support a program of state intervention with low-performing schools. The text focuses on the policy framework, such as the measures to be used and the rewards and sanctions that will be imposed, and the triggers for sanctions. The report also looks at some cross-cutting issues such as fairness, focus, coherence, understandability, capacity building, and legal defensibility. The report outlines what the nature of sanctions should be if schools fail to perform and describes what can be done when a state intervenes, such as examining and reexamining intervention strategies, using a common set of strategies across all schools, keeping the management system simple, focusing on measuring what is important, and expecting costs to be high. Some of the key elements of a school turnaround appear to be instilling legitimacy, reciprocity, and trust; capacity and support; and school-level leadership. Ways in which to close the professional learning gap and improve instructional quality are likewise offered. (Contains 13 endnotes.) (RJM)

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Can State Intervention Spur Academic Turnaround?

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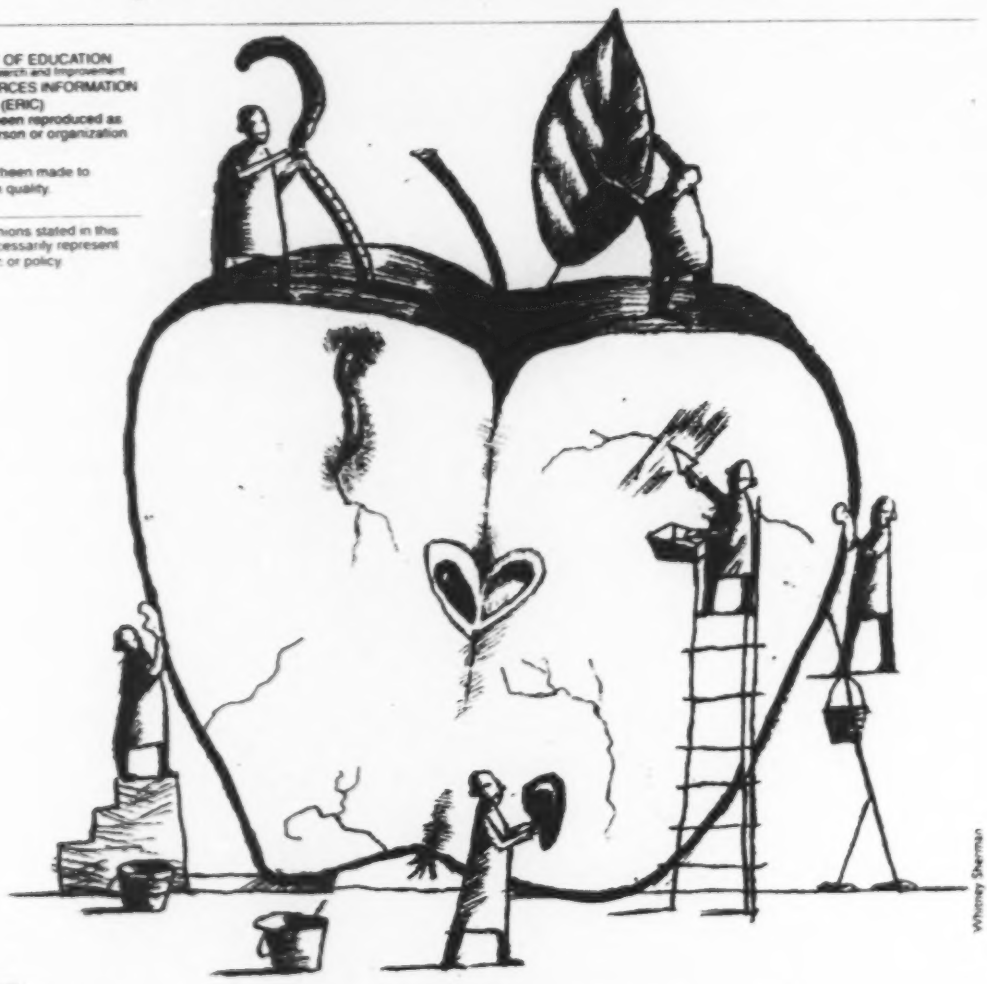

Whitney Sherman

This paper is an outgrowth of a Fall 1997 meeting co-sponsored by the State Education Improvement Partnership at the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Nevada Department of Education and WestEd.

Faced increasingly with a "change it or lose it" message about public education, states are adopting a get-tough approach: results-oriented school accountability systems with teeth. Some 32 states and 34 big urban districts now have accountability systems based, in part, on test scores.[1] Theoretically, these are centered on high standards. They entail consequences for outcomes. They aim to elevate system performance and, ultimately, improve student achievement. Whether the accountability movement will achieve those desired results remains to be seen. Already clear, however, is that data deriving from efforts underway are bringing into bold relief the issue

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of chronically low-performing schools and, more to the point, questions of what states can do about it.

As states move to intervene with such schools, virtually all face the dilemma of the far extreme: schools at the very bottom that dramatically, persistently fail their students. Evolving from this dilemma are experiments with academic takeover. Used historically for fiscal crises — cases of graft or malfeasance — takeover once implied a fairly straightforward process of removing corrupt officials. What's new is takeover for reasons of students' failure to achieve. And here what to do is far from clear.

As an example, the 72,000-student Cleveland school district was taken over in 1995 by the state of Ohio for "severe instability," both fiscally and academically. In just two years, the district's record $152 million debt was brought under control — "a piece of cake" compared with turning around the academics, says Richard A. Boyd, who served as Cleveland's first state-appointed superintendent. Despite multi-faceted efforts to improve student performance, only 20 percent of 9th graders passed a recent state proficiency test. Indeed, only 75 percent of students show up on any given day.

New data are bringing into bold relief the issue of chronically low-performing schools and — critically — what to do about it.

Clearly, the answer is to get at the problems earlier, before schools reach the desperation point. As states like Ohio are painfully aware, academic takeover is largely a leap into the unknown. No body of research yet exists to provide guidance. Most state education officials admit being far from eager to step in and run an academically failed school or district. The record of attempts is scant; of success even more so. The issue is bound up in questions of why schools fail, who is really responsible — for both the low performance and the turnaround — and, most fundamentally, how to effect a turnaround. Involved are issues of organizational behavior, community dysfunction, human psychology, legal precedents and larger, contextual problems of race, class and urban neglect. Yet the state ultimately bears responsibility for acting on behalf of the kids in such schools, almost invariably poor and minority children whose very life chances depend on the quality of their schools.

Hence, the upsurge of interest in early intervention — stepping in with state sanctions and/or assistance at the first signs of trouble. To do this, states must be absolutely clear about expectations of schools, careful to define the continuum of possible actions (e.g., stages of intervention), concise about what will trigger academic intervention and when, specific about the kinds of support to be provided at each stage, and — importantly — clear about what indicators will offer sufficient evidence of progress. The state can then put all its energy and resources into making sure that takeover, the option of last resort, never has to happen.

Under this approach, the *threat* of intervention — including, possibly, takeover — is harnessed as a motivational force, in the vein of Samuel Johnson's quote, "When a man knows he's to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." School staffs obviously chafe at having their school publicly branded — a practice being dubbed "accountability by humiliation." But experience so far indicates that the savvy and dedicated among them may welcome the external threat as a long-needed catalyst for gathering all forces in the school and greater community together under a flag of common purpose and — equally important — a deadline. The state, meanwhile, eager to avert takeover situations, has a strong incentive to go well beyond enforcer, instead partnering with the school and district to oust complacency, marshal combined talents and foster innovation and risk taking.

This paper looks at some of the difficult issues states are working through as they set up and implement strategies for academic intervention. What "machinery" needs to be in place to enable and support a program of state intervention with low-performing schools? What are the

nuts and bolts of intervention? And, most critically, what are the key elements of school turnaround?

Machinery of the Intervention

Some 22 states have passed "academic bankruptcy" laws, allowing state intervention along a continuum that ranges from warnings to temporary leadership replacement to takeover, which implies governance change.[2] But because the issues involved are so complex, consensus is emerging that the basis for academic intervention must be imbedded in sophisticated accountability systems, incorporating appropriate assessments and incentives.

At the hub of the effort should be *standards*, or clearly spelled out expectations for academic content and performance by subject and grade level. But determining acceptable performance levels requires wrestling with questions whose nature is epistemological. How good is good enough? How bad is bad enough? What is fair? As researcher David Cohen and others point out, these are all issues on which Americans deeply disagree.[3] Standards setting has been contentious in virtually every state that's attempted it. Decisions rest on finding consensus, with values being the centerpiece of the debate. And it must be acknowledged that the real action, on standards-setting and support for high performance, remains at the local level.

Policy Framework

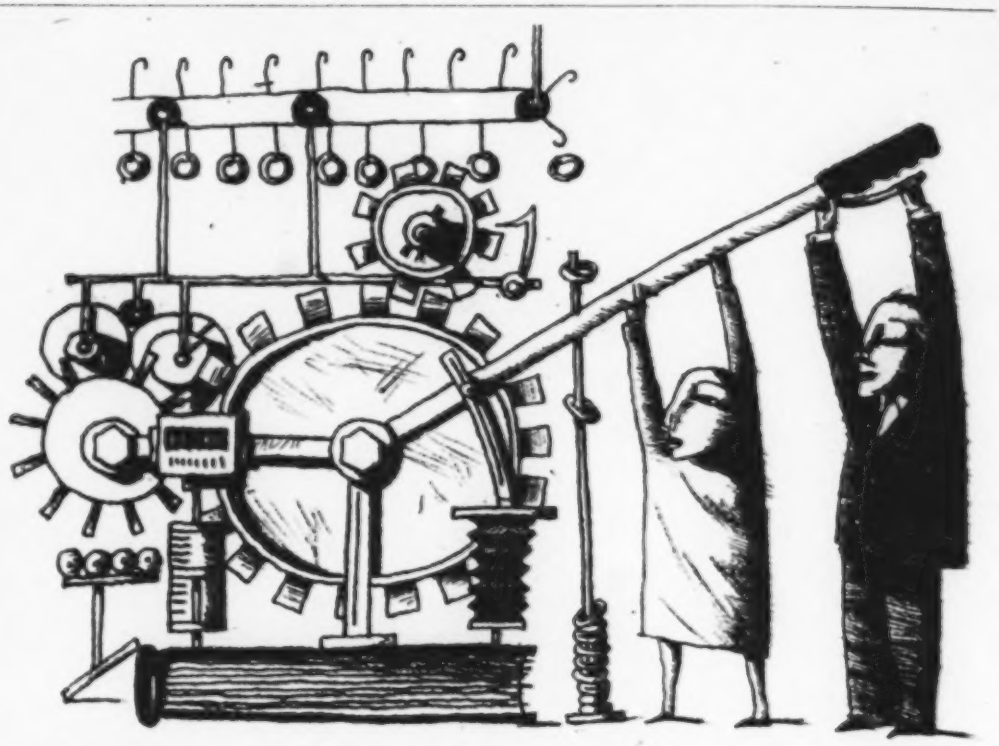
Beyond a set of agreed-upon standards, the effort requires ***unprecedented clarity*** spelled out in ***a detailed set of legislative statutes*** on the following:

• ***Measures.*** States must determine what yardstick(s) will be used to measure each school's performance under the standards. Questions states need to grapple with here include: Will the indicators of performance be qualitative (taking school culture and functioning into account) and/or quantitative? Will the accountability system use one measure or multiple measures? Will the assessment system employ criterion- or norm-referenced tests — or both? At what levels? Time intervals? On the technical front, how many student performance levels (e.g., "distinguished," "proficient," "novice") will figure into a school's performance index? Will non-cognitive measures (dropout, attendance, retention rates) be part of the index? What will be the state's overall performance target in what time period? (e.g., 90% students proficient in 10 years?) What will be the units of incremental progress? (one year? two years?) How will each school calculate its own index (score)? Will the state disaggregate school data by group, e.g., ethnic or minority or limited-English proficient?

(Some California districts are discovering that some schools do well in the aggregate but are failing a given minority group. Disaggregated data can be a safeguard, ensuring that those students don't fall through the cracks. It can also help a low-performing school focus its resources on students who need help most, thus also boosting progress toward growth targets.)

• ***Rewards and sanctions.*** States need to spell out incentives/consequences for performance. Doing so requires asking: What are fair and appropriate rewards for high performance and/or sanctions for unacceptably low? Will rewards or sanctions be determined on the basis of absolute performance (school scored better than others) or on growth toward performance targets (each school competes against its own past record) — or both? (Implicit here is the thorny issue of whether each school's index should be weighted for socio-economic status [SES]. As assessment expert Stanley Rabinowitz points out, the pros include a perception of greater fairness; cons are greater complexity and public confusion as well as a possible message that certain groups cannot be expected to perform at high levels. Kentucky, which focuses on progress under biennial growth targets and does not weight for SES, has found that demographics do not predict level of success, measured in terms of progress;

Evaluating school performance raises tough questions. How good is good enough? How bad is bad enough? What is fair?



Apart from clarity, the most critical factor for credibility and success is fairness.

rewarded and sanctioned schools span the full socio-economic spectrum.)

What are the school performance categories (e.g., "successful," "improving," "in decline")? What level of state resources will support rewards and/or interventions (assistance)? Will incentives — positive and negative — exist only for school staffs or also for students? (Though more than half the states say they provide rewards or sanctions for schools or districts based on test performance, only 14 plan to promote or graduate students based on whether they have met state standards.[4] Yet Tom Boysen, former state commissioner in Kentucky, insists that "before we get more sophisticated about rewarding [or sanctioning] adults, we need to get the attention of the kids. They need to know that their performance under the standards will have big consequences in terms of getting into universities and where they're placed there, and that employers will pay attention as well.")

• *Triggers for Sanctions.* At what level of performance will a school be labeled "low," i.e., at what exact point will some form of intervention (assistance) begin? If intervention will occur in phases, what criteria will define eligibility for phases 1, 2 or 3? What exactly will the intervention (assistance) be at each phase? What outcomes will be expected of the school, over what time period? How long a time will a school have to improve and, thus, end its probation or avert relegation to a more state-involved phase? By what criteria will a school be judged no longer "low performing"? Exactly what would trigger a shift from state vigilance to actual takeover? If takeover occurs, what exact criteria will determine when (and how) the state will leave?

Cross-Cutting Issues

A number of cross-cutting issues must be considered in building the system, including:

• *Fairness.* Apart from clarity, the most critical factor for credibility and success is fairness. If the system is not perceived as fair, it will fail. Foursquare are questions about whether all

students have equitable opportunities to learn what they're expected to know and to do well on the tests designed to measure that learning. Critical, then, is getting input from as many stakeholders as possible. Those needing a voice in the process include teachers, administrators, business and industry representatives, unions, parents and school board members.

• *Focus.* Builders of these systems must maintain a focus on the forest while in the thicket of trees. Throughout, they need to remember that this elaborate machinery is only a means to an end. The goal is supporting and enhancing student learning. Everything else is just the "how."

• *Coherence.* If the assessment system is not aligned with standards, the system will fail. Even more essential is that whatever measures are used must measure what you value — again underscoring the need for public input. If you value what students know and can do but measure what they have memorized, the assessment will drive the system away from the outcomes you want. Fairness becomes impossible.

• *Understandability.* A major challenge is balancing fairness — which necessarily creates complexity — with the need to have a system that is readily understood by the educators it affects and the public it seeks to serve. Related to this is the state's need to communicate clearly with critical players such as the media what the new system aims to accomplish and how.

• *Capacity building.* Threats or sanctions will not increase student achievement if the system discourages, rather than motivates and supports, teachers and administrators. Their efforts need to be bolstered by the professional development, resource and assistance they need to do the job.

• *Legal defensibility.* Courts are specific about what you can and cannot do with tests. Legal challenges are most likely to surface when assessments carry high stakes — for example, when students must pass a particular test to graduate. Other bases for legal challenges include tests being used for purposes other than those for which they were intended, tests measuring knowledge or skills that students have not had the opportunity to learn, or tests producing an adverse impact on historically disadvantaged groups.[5]

Policy Nuts and Bolts

Sanctions or interventions generally begin when a school or district fails to meet its clearly spelled-out improvement targets within an agreed-upon time period. The first phase is likely to require that the school staff, working with parents, community members and the district, do a comprehensive needs assessment and create an action plan wherein quantifiable learning goals and time frames are clearly delineated. Fairness dictates that schools at this phase must have at least as much leeway to be creative and take risks as an intervention team would have. (Schools often don't realize how much autonomy they have. As Oregon moved to enact an accountability system, 18 schools requested waivers; 17 of those didn't need them for what they wanted to do.)

If the school fails to improve sufficiently, it would go to the next phase, which is likely to mean assignment of a distinguished educator (DE) and/or other outside expert or team who would facilitate a transformation planning process. If the school still failed to improve within a designated amount of time, much more aggressive intervention would occur. Under California's proposed system, for example, once a state reaches this crisis point the State Board of Education would step in and determine whether to continue second-phase activities, reassign or transfer students or staff, reallocate resources or close the school.[6]

The system's goal is supporting and enhancing student learning. Everything else is just the "how."

Specifics differ from state to state, depending on the philosophy that underpins them. For example, some states have withheld money from

schools if performance remains low; others withhold accreditation, which may lead to cut-off of funds. Espousing an opposite psychology, North Carolina has intervened by enforcing teacher testing, then offering scholarships — in the form of paid time to learn and substitutes in their classrooms — to teachers who need help. Other ways of tying incentives to professional development include giving a wage credit when teachers take courses, but only if those courses are in keeping with a school's or district's goals.

As states struggle to find best ways to implement academic intervention, most look to Kentucky, whose five-year-old accountability system is often cited as a prototype. Through its DE program, the state has now intervened with 240 of its 1400 schools, and the DE program itself — with its by-products and growing voice in policy — has become a catalyst for systemic change. Robert Lumsden, Kentucky's associate commissioner of education, offers the following advice, based on that program's experience:

• *Throw all guns at the new program.* You'll need success and positive examples fast.

An academic intervention program will need success and positive examples fast.

• *Expand and market successes.* The legislature and public want to see spin-offs from their investment. In Kentucky, the DE training evolved into a leadership academy; the curriculum alignment approach required for schools in the DE program is being adopted by other schools as well.

• *Examine and re-examine intervention strategies.* Kentucky commissioned a study of its strategies even before getting results; evaluators gave the approach high marks.

• *Use a common set of strategies across all schools so you can talk about the program coherently.* But avoid inadvertently conveying a message that solutions are the same at each school. One strategy used across schools in Kentucky is curriculum alignment. But DEs have much latitude to tailor the "how" and "when" of the process to the readiness of each school's staff, a point that needed "marketing" to clarify early misunderstandings.

• *Keep the management system simple.* Overall management in Kentucky has three categories, with one state-level person in charge of each: recruitment, logistics (organizational issues), and "cut to the chase" — are we staying on course (with the conceptual model) and focusing on results (monitoring data)? Implementation is led by the DE teams so that decisions are grounded in the intervention, not the bureaucracy.

• *Focus on measuring what's important.* Kentucky insists that no paperwork be required from a DE that doesn't clearly support meeting the school's improvement goal.

• *Identify and fix structural problems.* Implementing the DE program has prompted Kentucky to remove obstacles to its success. For example, the planning process once required separate applications for federal and state discretionary money; now there's one application — a change that required organizational shifts at the state department. Moreover, the state and DE leaders worked together over a two-year period to strengthen high school graduation requirements after DEs pointed out that some students were not getting the opportunity to take the courses they needed to perform well on state exams.

• *Expect that the costs will be high.* Kentucky has found it costs $200,000-$250,000 over two years to turn a school around to the point of meeting its improvement goal. They're trying to get that figure down to $100,000. Yet Lumsden relates a growing belief that success depends on "a human, labor-intensive program with lots of one-on-one contact" between the change agent and the school. That requires sufficient allocation. He loops back to his first point — show results. "Results become the negotiating tool."

Worst Case: When Takeover Happens

State and local school officials who gathered in Nevada in Fall 1997 agreed that in extreme cases, academic takeover is warranted, on both constitutional and moral grounds. But they also agreed on the need for more information sharing and research to help the takeover agent. They shared the following bits of wisdom from hard experience:

- Takeovers have spawned accusations of discrimination against minorities and lawsuits alleging violation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. States appointing a takeover agent must be sensitive to these issues. In Cleveland, where student enrollment is 70 percent African American, the former state-appointed superintendent and white male Richard A. Boyd feels that only his strong community record made him acceptable. Similarly, anyone other than a local person put in charge may be regarded as a carpetbagger.
- Takeover can work, but you must define what "work" means. So far in New Jersey (Paterson, Jersey City and Newark) it hasn't turned student performance around, but State Commissioner Leo Klagholz sees hopeful signs. In Jersey City, for example, test scores have improved for two years in all or most categories in grades 4, 8 and 11.
- Takeover raises questions of state department capacity. Most state departments have neither the experience nor the staff to take on managing a school district.
- Takeover won't work if it's adversarial, says Massachusetts Deputy General Counsel Juliane Dow. "To make this kind of change, you need every teacher and administrator with you."
- Good quality vision and planning are essential.
- Solid leadership, especially at the school site level, is fundamental. The policy for school site principals should be one of "improve or remove."
- Solutions must be community-wide. In some cities school district failure is a symptom of urban decay. School leaders must work with the mayor to improve schools and attract industry. Without job creation, it's difficult to curb patronage practices such as that of Newark where 600 people had to be removed from the food services contract. (The state worked to find them city or other public-sector jobs.)
- In takeover situations, the local community has been disenfranchised by the corrupt or inept former leadership, Leo Klagholz points out. A key to success is re-empowering parents and teachers.
- Another key is finding ways to work cooperatively with unions. Whether or not the union is part of the problem (e.g., involved in corruption; engaged in stalling bargaining over petty issues), it must be part of the solution.
- You need to define when to leave and what "leave" means. As Richard Boyd notes, "It's easier to get into Bosnia than out." Upon leaving, you must ensure that local control does not result in reversion; often the old players are waiting in the wings.

Solid leadership, especially at the school site level, is fundamental.

At the School: Key Elements of Turnaround

The true challenge of devising the mechanics of intervention is to make sure approaches used accommodate and incorporate the human factors. What do research and experience reveal makes sense, psychologically and motivationally? What baseline kinds of support do school staffs need in order to change? Important elements for success include:

Legitimacy, Reciprocity and Trust

State intervention systems assume that the threat of sanctions will motivate educators to improve practice and, thus, student perfor-

mance. But organizational research suggests that such a threat can engender one of two reactions: 1) the desired response, i.e., the group becomes more cohesive, leadership develops and improvement results, or 2) the opposite — there is less cohesiveness and more divisiveness and leadership falls by the wayside. Researcher Jennifer O'Day, who has been documenting reconstitution (see box p.10), points out that the prime ingredient for ensuring the desired reaction is whether or not the people involved believe that the criteria and process are legitimate and fair.[7]

• *Legitimate criteria.* Do people understand the outcomes being sought and the criteria being set? Do they respect the criteria, i.e., does the system measure something important in terms of student performance? Are the criteria multifaceted, or will people say, "If this test is the sole criterion, it's not fair"? In Chicago, when an accountability system was adopted, some schools that had been improving were rated very low. What message did this send?

• *Fair process.* Do school staffs think the process of identifying schools and intervening with them is fair? Do they trust that purposive action, rather than sheer luck, will make a difference in whether or not more serious sanctions occur? Or do they believe that nothing they do will matter, so they might as well look for another job? For a time in San Francisco, six to seven schools a year were being placed on probation. However, because a consent decree called for at least three to be reconstituted, schools identified often feared that the odds were against them. That could serve as a de-motivator.

Teachers need to feel sure that despite a focus on students, adults also matter.

• *Respect.* Teachers need to feel sure that despite a focus on students, adults also matter, says O'Day. Even in schools with entirely new staffs, recruited on the basis of their willingness to work long hours, be a team and be held accountable for student learning, tensions exist simply because schools are communities of young people and adults. If a student is repeatedly, violently disruptive, for example, a stance of "We will keep him in school no matter what" may need to shift to "Maybe at this time this is not the place for this child." "The bottom line has to do with the place people work and the kind of support they feel," says O'Day. "This kind of relationship, this trust, is as much of an incentive as a monetary reward."

• *Capacity and support.* Does the school staff believe they have the capacity to alter the conditions in the school? Does the system balance threat and assistance by providing needed resources for professional and organizational development?

School-Level Leadership

A critical element of the capacity to change is leadership. A strong leader inspires people to believe in themselves, creating immediate optimism, a sense of common mission, and a powerful "can do" attitude. Summed up by New Jersey State Commissioner Leo Klagholtz, "If you believe in what you're working on, that belief is almost more important than the value of the strategy."

The urgency to bring in, develop and support strong principals is repeatedly underscored by experience and research. A study done on takeovers in New Jersey by Arthur Andersen noted that whether or not schools progress is less related to factors such as poverty or mobility than to school leadership. A critical piece, Leo Klagholtz corroborates, is changing the tenor of leadership, school by school. "Success hinges on the ability of the principal to translate the school's strategic plan into action by the faculty and community."

Robert Lumsden cautions that Kentucky's experience indicates that in at least 60 percent of interventions, you can change the tenor of leadership by supporting, not replacing, the existing principal. "You focus on improvement, build on that person's strengths." If the principal doesn't improve, the situation will self-correct once a DE is assigned to a school, he says, because "new community awareness of how poor he is will drive him out." Lumsden also

Closing the Professional Learning Gap

For student achievement to improve, an intervention strategy must focus strongly on capacity building. The following should be taken into account:

- *Policymakers tend to underestimate how much guidance and information teachers need* to become familiar with new standards, assessments and administration requirements; to understand how new forms of assessments are developed and scored; to examine and evaluate students' work under the standards; and to acquire enough information and pedagogical knowledge to change their practices.[8] With the exception of a few — notably Vermont and Kentucky — states have been slow to support ongoing professional development. Yet falling short on teacher capacity building almost certainly limits improvement. Some states seem to assume that accountability and incentives will prompt school districts to supply adequate teacher support. But in many districts resources for new materials or professional development do not exist.

- *Administrator development is critical.* Confirming the experience of many others, Oregon State Superintendent Norma Paulus says it was "a big mistake" when her state did teacher — but not administrator — staff development. Teachers only met with frustration when they tried to apply new approaches in school environments that blocked their efforts. What's needed are changes in the professional culture of schools. Administrators need support to become strategic thinkers who can organize a school to be results-oriented and play a supportive role as staff work through a continuous improvement process. Teachers need help to learn how to work together, become integral members of decision-making teams and use data for decision making.

- *Readily-available, whole-school restructuring programs can help.* The best involve extensive and ongoing professional development that helps teachers deal with classroom instruction and have clear goals that are well-matched to schools' goals.[9] Programs such as Success For All, the Comer School Development Program and Accelerated Schools have been found effective in educating low-income and minority students.[10]

- *Universities can play a central role.* In California, for example, new collaborations between teacher preparation colleges, school districts and county offices of education have resulted from the emergency created when thousands of inexperienced—often uncredentialed—teachers were hired under the state's 1996 class size reduction initiative. In Cincinnati, Ohio, a five-year partnership among the public schools, the University of Cincinnati and the teacher union has produced a program that links teacher education with student performance. The university's redesigned education program requires a major in the subject candidates will teach and practical experience in one of 11 new Professional Practice Schools.[11]

- *State department staff need support.* State departments of education, key partners in school turnaround, need to build their own capacity to help the staffs of low-performing schools or districts. State department staff may offer direct assistance. Or they may coordinate expertise from a variety of sources that can support schools in trying new approaches, making rational and informed choices among proven or promising programs and then continually assessing and improving the quality of those programs. Either way, they continually need ways to link with the best knowledge from research and practice.

If teachers don't have needed knowledge, skills and support, then no manner of threat or sanctions can turn a school around.

Does "Reconstitution" Work?

Reconstitution refers to the highly controversial — and spreading — practice of replacing a school's entire staff, from principal to custodians, as a remedy for failure. The assumption behind the move is that things are so bad that there is no alternative; the intent is to change the school's culture and the relationships there. Some research suggests that reconstitution might work, but the evidence remains sketchy.

Some clues come from the San Francisco Unified School District, where a 1983 desegregation court order focused not just on where students go to school but also on improving education for African American and Latino students. Under the authority of the consent decree, San Francisco reconstituted six schools in very underserved, highly segregated parts of the city in a full-fledged attempt to bolster learning in those areas.

Wiping out the faculty alone will not lead to long-term improvement in student performance.

The district took major responsibility for success by launching a massive campaign to recruit the best teachers available, adding technology and providing professional development and extra resources. Most importantly, it developed a set of philosophic tenets to guide the rebuilding of the schools. In 1992 a panel of expert evaluators assigned by the court found that African Americans in reconstituted schools were performing better than those from similar backgrounds in other parts of the city. As a result, the consent decree called upon the district to reconstitute at least three schools a year, starting in 1993-94.

How are the schools faring? Researcher Jennifer O'Day, who has been documenting this experiment, says effects on learning so far have been fairly promising.[12] Compared with schools of similar population, the reconstituted schools showed better performance, atmosphere, and staff and community relations. But O'Day's clearest finding is that positive results don't automatically follow from a personnel sweep. "Wiping out the faculty alone will not lead to long-term improvement in student performance." She offers suggestions about why success requires a comprehensive approach:

- THE SCHOOL SUFFERS FROM "A LEGACY OF FAILURE." The problem with starting anew is that, in reality, you aren't. The community is the same, and their first reaction is often negative. To even hope to change that, the new team needs to go out consistently and build ties. The school also must battle its reputation within the district. Few experienced teachers are willing to transfer into a school known as a failure. New staff may be talented and enthusiastic but inexperienced and devoid of veteran colleagues. Educators report initial chaos, as people settle in, build a team and set up instructional strategies.
- REBUILDING A SCHOOL REQUIRES LEADERSHIP AND A SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURE BETWEEN SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERSHIP. San Francisco has learned this lesson. At one school, after three unsuccessful years and four principals, the district has sent in a top principal; the school is turning around. Mechanisms are in place that coordinate resources for reconstituted schools and foster networking and leadership development among the principals.
- RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF TEACHERS IS CRITICAL. Lead time to recruit and plan is critical. In one high school, the new principal had just five weeks, and the legacy of failure precluded finding teachers from within the district. Many credit the success of San Frahcisco's first round of reconstitutions to the months of lead time and the degree of responsibility assumed by the district for putting the pieces in place.
- CHANGING A SCHOOL REQUIRES VISION AND A LONG-RANGE STRATEGY. At schools that have succeeded, the principal not only had extra help and resources, but also a strategy for reaching the goal. One danger is assuming — and leading the public to believe — that in a year or two, everything will be fine. Things should be better, but seeing the full impact takes much longer.

emphasizes the importance of leadership stability after the intervention team leaves. For the past year, Kentucky has been tracking 30 turned-around schools to see what happens after the DE leaves. "Five have slipped, and four of those have had changes in principals."

Instructional Quality

Teaching is the heart of the matter in whether students learn. If the teaching staff does not have the knowledge and skills to bring the kids they teach to high standards of achievement, then no manner of threat, intervention or leadership can turn around a low-performing school.

The challenge is to support teachers in learning what they need to know and changing their attitudes and practices. Much research shows that the assistance teachers need is not one-shot workshops or "training" but professional development that is intensive, ongoing and linked to practice. In the inner city, home of many of the nation's low-performing schools, the need for this kind of professional development is especially acute. These schools have the hardest time attracting qualified, experienced teachers. Yet the children in them are the most likely to be minority, poor or affected by other life circumstances that make them most in need of sophisticated teaching practices.

Resources

There is wide agreement that simply throwing money at the problem isn't going to solve it. But without sufficient funding, schools can't harness the human and intellectual resources essential to progress. U.C. Berkeley professor Pedro Noguera has praised the San Francisco Unified School District for being the only large, inner-city district in the country that has seen test scores, graduation rates and a host of other achievement indicators rise consistently over the past five years.[13] District policy changes have been aimed at elevating academic standards for all students. Noguera sees money as a clear factor in this success, and San Francisco has more of it than other California big city districts (though less than counterparts in the East). But he says what seems key is the coupling of resources with leadership and commitment. Superintendent Waldemar Rojas has focused "laser-like" on strategies for improving student achievement, Noguera notes, especially emphasizing the needs of the poorest and least prepared students (see also "Reconstitution," p. 10).

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Unanswered Questions

Academic intervention strategies entail many unanswered questions. Worries remain about using test scores as the sole determinant of which schools are labeled low performing, as is happening in a number of places. Debate also continues over how to determine reasonable timelines for improved performance, especially for student achievement. Most fundamentally, how best to structure and direct resources to address the complex of leadership, staff, organizational and community development issues at play in a failing school or district remains more art than science.

Clearly, one great challenge is combining the big stick and the helping hand and pooling talent to push for results. States need to avoid sending a "gotcha" message that will offend professionalism, trigger defensiveness and, thus, subvert their own goal. As Jennifer O'Day notes, the real key to success appears to be reciprocity — between those designing the system and those in the schools. States and districts can and should expect schools to function at their best and serve students well. But schools also have the right to expect that they will be given sufficient resources and support to do the job.

—Joan McRobbie

With input from other WestEd staff members, including Lisa Carlos, Stanley Rabinowitz and Paul Hood.

This document is posted on our Policy Program web site at www.WestEd.org/policy

Endnotes

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7. Jennifer A. O'Day of the University of Wisconsin-Madison is associate director of the Pew Forum on Education Reform, a continuing body of education leaders, researchers, practitioners, and advocates who share a common interest in improving U.S. schools. This document draws from her presentation to a gathering of chief state school officers and others in Fall 1997 and from a February 1998 interview.

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12. O'Day, presentation and interview.

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